THE PROBLEM OF THE HIGH SCHOOL FRATERNITY

WILLIAM BISHOP OWEN
The University High School

The high-school fraternity has become a serious problem within the past few years. These organizations have sprung into existence and become well established under the eyes of school authorities, who have suddenly realized that they were called upon to deal with forces not easy to control, and less easy to remove from the sphere of school life. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the fraternities should have entered the secondary school so recently. The rapid development of our schools in the last decade, the increase in the total number of such schools and in the number of pupils in each school, and the rapidly growing number of high-school students entering our colleges readily suggest the explanation of this new phase of school life. The college fraternity, which not more than a generation ago was in many instances compelled to battle for its life, has become the model for the school fraternity. The college fraternity has become a recognized institution, meeting with little opposition on the part of college authorities. It is fair to ask whether this is likely to be the case, after a period of opposition, with the high-school fraternity. It would be hasty to infer from the result of the contest in the colleges that a like result will follow in the case of the schools. At all events, it is high time that those concerned with the management and development of our high schools should give a sober thought to this new problem, should try to deal with the question in a large way, and reach a solution that will be approved by the better judgment of educators and parents, and accepted as reasonable by the unprejudiced high-school pupils. It is the aim of this paper to point out some of the broader considerations in the light of which a wise conclusion would seem possible.

It seems safe for us to assume that the fraternity problem is a very real one for all connected with our schools, a problem that cannot be solved by ignoring its existence. Principals and teachers who are not opposed to the fraternity system in their schools admit the genuineness

of the difficulties connected with their control by enumerating devices, such as faculty supervision, which have proved adequate for the purpose. But the almost unanimous opinion against the high-school fraternity, wherever associations of teachers have expressed themselves on the subject, warrants us in assuming, for the present at least, that the fraternity is a problem for the teacher. The parents have not had the same opportunity for organized expression; but if the movement for the formation of parents' associations in connection with the schools continues, we shall not have long to wait for evidence from this quarter. Any school principal may be appealed to without hesitation for testimony on the part of individual parents that the experience with the new institution has features calling for a full measure of wisdom and firmness. One class of persons most immediately concerned with the effects of the fraternity on the school life will, it must be said with regret, in the present state of public opinion in the schools themselves, be slow to give organized expression to their views in the matter. A recent experience, where every effort was made to facilitate an unhampered expression on the part of non-fraternity members of a school, has convinced the writer that such students ought hardly to be expected to do more than to give individual opinions in mutual confidence. Sense of personal pride and a generous desire to avoid criticism of one's fellows are sufficient motives for maintaining silence under conditions where older heads often want the aggressive courage to protest. Fraternity members also have been free to acknowledge the faults of the system, although fairness leads us to say that the number is not large. Where, as has been suggested, teachers, parents, and pupils are conscious of a serious problem, we shall not go astray in assuming that we are discussing a vital question, and may proceed to consider whether the strain is but the healthy concomitant of a necessary adjustment or the significant evidence of the struggle of the organism to throw off a foreign and harmful element.

Within the relatively short time since the problem has begun to receive serious attention, various methods for dealing with it have been suggested, which may be roughly classed under one of three heads: the *laissez-faire* method, the method of indirect substitution, and the direct repressive method. The first two methods do not avowedly at least, aim at the extinction of the fraternity; the third meets the issue squarely

and would prohibit fraternities in the secondary school. It would hardly be necessary, in a paper which is concerned with the discussions of ends rather than means, to treat of these methods, were it not that each of the plans mentioned implies a characteristic view of the function of the fraternity in school life. It is worth our while, therefore, to get before us a clear idea of these views, with their implications, as a step toward the formulation of the standpoint of the writer to be set forth in following pages. Each method will be seen to imply certain views as to the nature of the secondary school as a social institution, and as to certain principles to be followed in the control of the schools.

The *laissez-faire* doctrine of the high-school fraternity states its position broadly in some such terms as these: The tendency of human beings is to form associations with their fellows. This instinct for fellowship manifests itself among the young as well as among the adult members of society. Boys organize clubs long before they reach the high-school age. This instinctive tendency is simply to be accepted as a fact to be reckoned with. It is a tendency, moreover, to be encouraged, as it leads to self-knowledge and results in much-needed social enlightenment. The aims and interests of boys are not comparable with those of their elders, and the elders are incompetent to provide suitable substitutes, and in trying to do so, they are in reality attempting to deprive the boys of the opportunities for social education which alone are effective. The whole modern movement in education is a protest against the endeavor to foist upon the young the matured point of view, the elaborated scale of values, of the teacher or the community. If the secrets, the emblems, the corporate success of his fraternity, so dear to the boy's heart, are in reality but trifles, they are tremendous issues for him; and in so treating them he is entirely within his rights, is forming his own standards; and this is the vital thing for him. Later on, in his own good time, he will come to discriminate between the essential and the merely accidental; will, because of, and not in spite of, his experience, enlarge his range of sympathy and interest, retaining, to be sure, a praiseworthy affection for his comrades of the charmed circle, but capable of passing a man's judgment on men and issues. The fraternity, then, is but one more instance of the working out of this gregarious instinct, located by chance in the school community, because association

with one's fellows is inevitable under the school organization; more definitely organized than were the youthful associations that the teacher looks back upon, but, after all, not essentially different, and not meriting particular recognition as such on the part of school authorities. From this standpoint, the duty of the authorities is clear: "Hands off." Of course, individual or collective violations of school discipline or the laws of good conduct are to be punished on their own basis; in fact, this is the only justifiable ground for any action against the fraternity or its members, because it lays the responsibility where it belongs, and does not confound the misdemeanors of individuals with the supposed evils of a system. If one fraternity maintains an organized opposition to good government in the school, eliminate the unruly member, thereby bringing to public consciousness the realization that offenders, whether individual or corporate, are justly dealt with on the basis of conduct. The unoffending fraternities will have received an object-lesson, and the cause of public order will be helped because of the just discrimination made. This, in the main, is the doctrine. It would doubtless be better stated and illustrated by its adherents, but its essential features, both theoretical and practical, have been touched upon.

The theoretical plausibility of this doctrine and the well-considered sequences of its fundamental articles ought not to blind us to its defects and omissions. Let us enumerate some of these. The first of these is the assumption that, because the social instinct is fundamental and universal, the fraternity is the proper "form" for its manifestation. We should hardly be willing to accept an educational theory that made the primal character of impulse and instinct an excuse for permitting them to express themselves without regard to their effects on the individual or society. Precisely this is the function of education—to guide and mold impulse into ways of usefulness; to provide the individual with criteria for the regulation of his impulses and instincts by reference to the results of his conduct on the well-being and happiness of others. In a word, the essence of the question is whether the fraternity is a proper form of social organization inside of a school. Certainly no one would maintain that it is the only form yielding legitimate satisfaction. Another serious defect in the *laissez-faire* doctrine is the tacit assumption that the significant social relations

of the fraternity are within the group, affecting only its own members, while its outward relations are incidental and hardly a subject for discussion. Most careful observers of the workings of the system would maintain, I think, just the opposite view, that the effect of the organization on the school life is the significant thing in the problem, barring which its influence on the individual members might well be left to individual treatment. As we shall see later, the fraternities themselves recognize by their actions that the chief attraction in their system is the easily achieved distinction of standing out in bold relief from the background furnished in apparent acquiescence by the whole body of less fortunate fellow-students. But, from an educational standpoint, the most striking defect in this doctrine is to be found in its underlying conception of the nature and function of the school. It would claim, no doubt, that the school is a great social institution. Does it not provide intellectual training for the future members of society, thus putting at the disposal of the young the experience of the past as a proper equipment for the solution of the problems of the future? To provide this training is to have performed its function. But to do more than this, save indirectly, is not the province or the right of the school. Society has other complementary institutions to which social training may be and must be left. The family, the church, business and political institutions, society itself so far as it environs the individual, are adequate to the task of providing social education. It would be easy to show that, historically, these same institutions once were relied upon to furnish adequate intellectual training, and the history of education is but a recounting of the steps by which society came to transfer to the schools more and more consciously the task of the intellectual education of the young. It would be a wise man who could predict with certainty that society intends to stop here. But were it to do so, we should still be right in calling the school a great social institution. Indeed, this would seem to be what is usually meant in current educational literature, when emphasis is laid on the social character of the school. But there is another sense in which the school is a social institution, in that it is itself a society; a society organized, to be sure, for definite intellectual ends, but none the less forming a large part of the social environment of the pupil, and thereby providing, whether we recognize it or not, a great share of the

social education of the pupil. Of the social character of the school, in this narrower sense, one finds but little recognition in educational theory and practice. Will anyone seriously claim that society has provided, outside of the school, for the proper direction of this education? Can the school, which incidentally, if you please, creates a society, afford to overlook the character that society assumes, save as it affects its purely intellectual mission? On whose head will fall the responsibility for the kind of training this society affords its members? Will the family, can the family or society at large, control this education? It is this function of the school that the *laissez-faire* doctrine overlooks. And yet right here lies the crucial point in the whole problem.

The second method of solving the problem we have called the method of indirect substitution. The main features in this proposed solution embody a distinct recognition of the social appeal made by the fraternity, but would seek to gratify the social impulse through other organizations. The chief harm in the fraternity, it is claimed, is due to the exclusively social aims, and consequent trifling character, of its results. Organizations of a different character with predominately educational aims would incidentally provide adequate social satisfaction, and give permanent and valuable results. The debating club, musical organizations, arts and crafts societies, camera clubs, etc., should be organized, thus giving opportunity for every individual taste, while training the student to apply legitimate interests as the standard for his social selections. The claim is made that through these agencies the student body will come to recognize the inadequacy of the fraternity for the very purpose it is supposed to serve. This method seems open to two objections, a theoretical and a practical one. The practical objection is that experience seems to show that it does not do what it claims to be able to accomplish. Instead of displacing the fraternity, these clubs but provide new fields for the operation of the political genius of the fraternity leaders. To secure the officers of such clubs, to manage them so as to increase the honor-list of fraternity members, becomes at once the aim of the fraternities. Indeed, the claim is openly made that such organizations could not be conducted save by the energetic efforts of the students who by their very qualities are inevitable fraternity timber. The second objection is more theoretical, but just

as much justified by experience. The social instinct cannot be satisfied incidentally. There is such a thing as social recreation, legitimate and inevitable. To attempt to secure this incidentally to the accomplishment of some other end, however good in itself, is to miss the mark. The free and unhampered enjoyment of the society of one's friends is not only a good in itself, but affords a necessary relaxation from the more serious activities of student life, whether formally or informally organized. It is because the fraternity does afford this purely social enjoyment, with its opportunity for close friendship, that it has its strong hold on the young as well as the mature student. However valuable and necessary other clubs may be, they do not and cannot afford this purely social satisfaction. If a substitute is to be found, it must be of a kind to meet this demand directly and avowedly.

The third method of dealing with the fraternity is that of direct prohibition. All things considered, the writer believes that this is the right solution. The remainder of the discussion is, therefore, devoted to a consideration of the reasons for this belief, and to the suggestion of ways and means for the elimination of the fraternity from the school life.

It is a simple axiom, holding good in educational discussions as well as in practical life, that one should not support a good cause by the use of bad arguments. It would be difficult to find a subject where this axiom ought more strictly to be observed than that of the fraternity question. There is hardly any topic on which there is so much need of clear thinking, of discrimination between the essential and the incidental. One ought not to be too exacting, perhaps, where apparent and unquestioned evils are to be combated. If occasionally a high-school principal finds associated with the fraternities his greatest obstacles in the way of good government and good morals, he may be pardoned for confounding the fraternity system with its local manifestations. But surely a dispassionate view of the subject ought to enable us to recognize real distinctions and to discover what the real issue is. The parent and the pupil, as well as the teacher, have a right to this clear recognition of the ground of opposition to the fraternity.

First of all, then, let us admit in all fairness that many of the charges brought against the fraternity are aside of the mark, if actually not petty. It is charged, for example, that the fraternities encourage

immorality. Under this blanket charge are included smoking, drink-
ing, card-playing, truancy, etc.—including, in short, all the faults and
vices found among young people. No doubt these particular evils
are found among fraternity members. No doubt, too, that individual
fraternities, as constituted at a particular time, do promote these evils.
But it is equally true that other fraternities are strong influences
against the same practices, and that non-fraternity pupils readily find
associates in the practices. The writer very much doubts, from his
own experience, whether it can be held, after a fair comparative study
of the matter, that fraternity members are any more guilty of these
practices than others. It is to be remembered that the fraternity is,
by reason of its organization, particularly susceptible of observation.
Other groups in the school do not stand out, and are actually not
studied with the same care. Conclusions on this score are consequently
hastily drawn and without comparative value. The same
may be said also of the ranking of the fraternity students in their
studies. An investigation published in the *School Review* some time
ago showed that the charge that the influence of fraternities on the
scholastic standing of their members was detrimental is, in one
institution at least, entirely without foundation. If these charges
are unfounded, it is certainly harmful to base opposition upon them.
It is to be remembered that no fraternity is organized to promote
vice. Many fraternities have, in this respect, a wholesome influence
on their members. It is an outrage on the feelings of such frater-
nities to charge them unjustly and indiscriminately with evils that
they are resolutely combating. I should unhesitatingly declare that
such a course is not only not beneficial, but positively harmful to the
individual pupils as well as to the school. It ought to be a funda-
mental article of school government that restrictions and prohibitions
should be based on grounds that will not lead to moral confusion on
the part of the pupil. The average high-school student, in the long
run, can appreciate and will approve genuine moral distinctions.
A high-school student, when discussing this charge against the frater-
nity, pointed out that it was the duty of the school to punish these
immoral practices by proceeding against the offenders, whether individ-
ual or corporate, instead of confounding the innocent with the guilty;
and, in my opinion, he was right.

Again, it is but fair to recognize that the fraternity meets a real social need. This is not to say that the system is therefore justified, or that it meets the need in the proper way. But it is hard to believe that so many young people would cling so persistently and devotedly to a kind of organization with an aim so purely social, were they not finding in it some fundamental satisfaction. Moreover, the fraternity is a means of satisfying this need that the students have evolved for them-selves—a significant fact to be remembered in any treatment of the question. We may well ask ourselves what positive attempts have been made by the schools to provide for all, or even a part, of the students what the students have provided for themselves. Were a wise student to put to us this question, would it quite meet the case to tell him that we were not satisfied with his attempt, though we had nothing ourselves to suggest ? Shall we not, in our solution of the problem, be compelled to provide him a substitute, not merely that we shall recog-nize as such, but one that he too will, in time, find even more satis-factory ?

Let us, then, try to put before us the real grounds for believing that the fraternity should not be permitted in the secondary school. This we shall not be able to do without touching briefly upon the nature and function of the school. In so doing we may seem to be elaborating the obvious, but the method will have the advantage of bringing out clearly at the start the background of opinion that contributes whatever signi-ficance may attach to what is maintained in our definite propositions.

The school is an artificial society; it is not, therefore, without his-torical justification, nor is it likely to be superseded. It is artificial in the sense that it is an institution which has not, like other social institu-tions been evolved by its members for the sake of accomplishing some end to which fundamental and natural impulses have pointed. The school has been established by adults for the attainment of ends selected by adults, which ends are supposed to secure the ultimate good of the members of the school. While the purpose and scope of the school have varied through the ages, it is safe to say that, while religious, moral, and intellectual aims have received adequate consideration, the social training of the pupils has received but little attention. It has been the assumption that society outside of the school has made sufficient provision for this training. To some extent this is true, but

neither society nor the school itself has sufficiently recognized the fact that the school-society is a peculiar thing. The result is that the social relations into which the pupil passes on entering school have not been looked upon as a subject for special study and regulation, but have been left to the students themselves. The fraternity has arisen as an attempt on the part of the students to regulate these social relations. Of course where questions of order or morality have come up, the school has long exercised control. But the school has not reached the point of announcing the theory that it has the duty of controlling the social life of the pupils, in so far as that social life is created by the school itself. Without attempting to dwell on this doctrine, which might well be elaborated and defended, it may suffice to call attention to the fact that this theory furnishes the criterion for the duty and authority of the school in the fraternity matter. It is the duty of the school to prescribe the kind of social life that may have its origin and place in the school-society It is within the authority of the school to regulate and control the social life of its students, where that social life plainly and unmistakably is associated with the school. If this conception of the duty and authority of the school is sound, as the writer believes it is, the following objections to the fraternity in the school may not seem fanciful and remote.

First, the fraternity is harmful to the individual student because it forms a fixed, instead of a fluctuating group. This objection is the adequate answer to the defense of the fraternity made on the score that social grouping is a natural thing. It is natural for the young to associate with one another, and such association is extremely beneficial. All that is usually adduced under this head may be accepted without impairing the force of the objection just mentioned. A boy comes to the high school with his intellectual and moral standards unfixed. Even when he has received the best of training at home, his standards are, after all, those of his parents rather than his own. He is going within four years, either to reject, reaffirm, or reconstruct what has been handed over to him rather than elaborated by him. It is his experience with his fellows that will enable him to do this. Above all things, he should be in a position, during these trying and confusing years, to make selection and choice as wisdom increases. The fraternity offers him companionship and a sort of distinction. It asks him,

in turn, to bind himself for four years to associates who themselves will change, maybe for the worse. It tightens the bond by an appeal to his sense of honor, his pride of opinion, his loyalty, his fear of ostracism, and the dread of being put in a false light; in short, all the finer instincts of a boy are made the guarantee that if he makes a wrong choice, he will not be able to right it by withdrawing from the fraternity. The few instances that might be cited to the contrary only serve to prove the rule. This objection, too, is the vital element in the numerous arguments for and against the fraternity, so far as they concern the interests of the individual member. If it be true that a boy can learn to discriminate between proper and improper associates, that his own narrow and one-sided views and opinions can be altered for the better, that he can gain self-knowledge, only as he lives in vital relations with his fellows, it is doubly true that the advantage of such insight can be conserved only on the condition that he be able to act out what he has learned. Both aspects of this demand for social opportunity must be insisted on, if any sort of moral training is to result. The high-school pupil should be permitted freely to form associations with his fellows, but he must remain free to change them. It is a sheer assumption that the fixed organization affords any greater opportunity for social education than the shifting group. It is undeniable, on the other hand, that the iron law of once a member always a member dulls the sense of discrimination, substitutes group loyalty for individual freedom of choice, and makes the criterion for judging one's fellows their position within or without an artificial group, instead of their inherent worth. It is the duty of the school, therefore, to insure for its wards the unrestricted opportunity to make and remake choice of companions, at least within the range of this authority—that is, within the school itself.

The second objection to the fraternity is that it dominates the social organization of the school. It would be unfair to claim that this is the avowed purpose of the fraternity. It is, nevertheless, a simple matter of fact, to which any impartial observer can give testimony. The writer has recently had the opportunity to listen to a debate on the question of fraternities in high schools—a debate continued through many sessions and participated in by pupils, parents, and teachers. In the course of this debate, all the stock arguments for and against the system in its bearing on the school were rehearsed and reiterated. It was argued in

behalf of the fraternities that their members not only were the leaders in all recognized school activities, but that the system developed such leaders. The implication was that the school for this very reason needed the fraternities. While the purely political character of much of this influence might have been adduced as a counter-argument, the discussion was confined to the merits of the system without undue emphasis on its faulty workings. Again and again, in the course of the argument, the question was asked: If the fraternity is such a good institution for the school because of its influence on fraternity members, what definite provision is there in the fraternity system for the social development of the non-fraternity members? Although the question was formulated in many ways, for the sake of securing a clear comprehension of its meaning, it was never answered. There is no answer. We may well excuse the immature pupil for not recognizing his duty toward less fortunate members of the school. We may even suggest that we should hardly blame him for elaborating a social system that meets his wants, even if others are overlooked. But we cannot therefore, close our own eyes to the facts. And what shall we say as to the school authorities whose duty it is to take a large view of the whole? Shall they, too, adopt the view that it is inevitable that some be left out, and that those who are left out are the unfit? Shall they have recourse to the analogy of mature society, where the same process of selection takes place? It all depends on the view we take of the function of the school. Why, pray, should we boast that the new education has discovered the child, and point to our enlightened psychology which demands that the mature results of science and the arts should be adapted to the capacity of the developing mind? Are we to forget, then, that the social nature of the child is also developing? And are there to be no adaptations on this score? Are we to train the child to make intellectual and practical judgments by the use of material selected, because we know that he can manage it, and give no heed to his method of forming social judgments, nor to the material which is offered him for the exercise of those judgments?

The fraternity system is detrimental to the school, therefore, because, while organizing the school society, it confessedly makes no provision for the social good of the whole. It should be eliminated because it does not permit of the social organization of the school. It is

idle to claim that the fraternity is not to blame for this, and that it does not prevent others from seeking such form of social life as they choose. Were it advisable or necessary, the writer could bring abundant evidence that, in practice, as long as the fraternity system is present, the effect is to prevent anything like a broad social life.

The writer has said that direct prohibition is, in his opinion, the only solution of the problem. Is this possible? It is believed by some that the courts will not sustain public-school authorities in such action. There is some evidence for believing that they will. But, whatever the present likelihood, we must believe that our legislatures and our courts which in their acts and decisions concerning child-labor and juvenile courts, have come to recognize the need of a wide difference of treatment as between adults and children, will support the school authorities in enforcing wise regulations affecting the good of so many thousands of our future citizens. The large private and endowed institutions are free to make such prohibition. The movement for the organization of parents' associations in connection with the schools can be counted upon to be of great service in reaching a proper solution of the question. In one instance the parents' association made it possible for the school to take action without unnecessary friction.

But mere prohibition will not suffice. The schools must have something positive to offer. As has been said before, the fraternity is the solution of the social problem in the school as developed by a portion of the school itself. It is unsatisfactory, as the circumstances of its origin would lead us to expect. The school authorities, working with all the pupils and for all the pupils, must evolve a solution that will be satisfactory to all. That this can be done is the writer's sincere belief.